


Solving Chicago's gear-grinding gridlock

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Editorial Board



Every workday, gridlock on Chicago's expressways erodes motorists' patience. Try to stay cheery when a guy starts to wedge into the 6-foot space between your car and the car in front of you, or when bumper-to-bumper traffic makes you late for that presentation you've been working on for weeks. Gridlock erodes something else: the Chicago area's economy, to the tune of \$7.3 billion a year in lost productivity and fuel, transportation planning experts say.

It's an old problem, and simply adding new lanes to highways won't solve it. There's a fresh effort, however, that has potential to relieve the region's bottlenecks. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is teaming up with the Illinois Department of Transportation and the Illinois Tollway to brainstorm fixes for the region's expressway system. They'll look at more than a dozen stretches of expressway in need of relief — including segments of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Stevenson and Dan Ryan, as well as Interstate 80 in the south suburbs.

A solution they'll examine that has worked elsewhere: congestion pricing, under which motorists pay for the privilege of bypassing gridlock. CMAP says congestion pricing applied to an added lane of highway can shorten a motorist's morning rush-hour commute by a third to two-thirds. Rush-hour traffic in un-tolled lanes would drop by a quarter to a third, according to CMAP research.

Seattle knows how well congestion pricing works. Overall rush-hour speeds on one highway in that city improved 19 percent after congestion pricing was made available, according to the

Government Accountability Office. In San Diego, drivers who used a congestion pricing toll lane saved 20 minutes in their commute, compared with motorists in un-tolled lanes, the GAO reported.

Congestion pricing makes sense. Drivers who want to get from A to B faster pay for the privilege. Revenue generated by tolls can be channeled back into transportation projects. Some cities that rely on congestion pricing waive the fees for car poolers, which means fewer cars clogging highways.

Other ideas CMAP, IDOT and the Tollway will look at: using expressway shoulders for buses, an idea already used on the Jane Addams tollway and on Interstate 55. And installing sensors along expressways that gather real-time data on bottlenecks, so motorists know ahead of time which stretches to avoid.

Where's the money going to come from to pay for all this? CMAP Executive Director Joseph Szabo told Crain's Chicago Business that an increase in the state's gasoline tax to pay for the improvements can't be ruled out. But Illinois' 19-cent gas tax, which hasn't been raised since 1991, simply hasn't coughed up enough money to pay for all of the state's transportation projects. As cars become more energy-efficient, a gas tax becomes less reliable as a source of funding.

A better idea would be a "vehicle miles traveled" tax. Miles driven could be logged via car transponders that automatically deduct tolls, or through some other GPS-type device.

CMAP, IDOT and the Tollway expect to put the finishing touches on their vision to fix expressway gridlock by mid-2018. If congestion pricing becomes a component of that plan, we hope the state does more with the idea than it did when CMAP brought it up in 2012, which was zilch. The Chicago region has a lot to offer businesses and people thinking of moving here, but it also has more than its share of turnoffs. One of them: clogged highways. It's about time the region starts unclogging them.

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